DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 137 721 CS 003 248

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TITLE Diagnosing Reading Needs of Secondary School Students.
PUB DATE [76]
NOTE 8p.; Report prepared at York College of the City University of New York

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cloze Procedure; *Content Reading; English Instruction; *Informal Reading Inventory; *Readability; Reading Comprehension; *Reading Diagnosis; Reading Instruction; Secondary Education; Textbooks

ABSTRACT

Three informal measures for determining whether students can read the assigned text material are described in this paper. The diagnostic measures are the informal textbook test, the cloze procedure, and the informal skills test. In the informal textbook test, a student is asked to read a 250 word passage selected from the textbook intended for classroom use, first orally, then silently, and to answer questions prepared by the teacher to represent both literal and inferential comprehension. The cloze test involves selecting passages, deleting every fifth word, and asking students to fill in the blanks with an appropriate word. Scores between 44 percent and 57 percent correct indicate that the material is at instructional reading level. The informal specific skills test consists of paragraphs selected to represent skills such as comprehending the author's intent and noting the central thought in a series of paragraphs. Prescriptive teaching is suggested based on the findings. These informal measures are suggested for the English teacher specifically but could be used in all content areas. (MKM)

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Diagnosing Reading Needs of Secondary School Students

It is no secret that thousands of students in secondary schools have reading problems, that is, are not reading as well as they should. The reading skills of too many of them are not commensurate with their cognitive abilities as well as not sufficient to cope with the reading demands of their school subjects. In fact, it has been estimated that from 20 per cent to 40 per cent of our high school population is reading below grade norms.[1]

As secondary school educators have become aware of students' reading problems, attempts have been made to help these students. One major thrust has been to urge every teacher to teach, in conjunction with the content of of the subject itself, the reading skills perquisite to the reading of the subject matter. A different thrust has been to set up reading departments or at least to employ one or more reading specialists to work directly with students, in small groups or individually, helping them to develop reading proficiencies. By far, however, it has been left to (or assigned to) the English teacher to do something to improve students' reading.

In order for the English teacher to be able to do anything to help any student with his or her reading, the teacher must know what the student's reading status is. For this, the teacher needs to determine, not only the student's level of reading ability, but also the specific nature of the student's reading needs (weaknesses). Instruction then can be planned and carried out to meet these needs, using appropriate level materials. Some

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appropriate diagnostic procedures for making this kind of assessment are described below. They are procedures that can be undertaken by the English teacher in the regular classroom setting.

Informal Textbook Test

This test, prepared by the teacher, has a two-fold purpose. The first purpose is to ascertain if the pupil can read, with adequate word recognition and comprehension the textbook(s) required for his or her particular grade, and if not, to ascertain the level of the reading materials he or she is able to read effectively. The second purpose is to determine the specific elements of word identification and comprehension with which the pupil has difficulty. Obtaining both kinds of information (pupil's functional reading level and pupil's specific reading deficiencies) will enable the teacher to use appropriate level reading materials and to teach needed reading skills.

To administer the test, the teacher selects a continuous, typical passage of about 250 words from the text intended for classroom instructional use and prepares a double-spaced typewritten copy of that passage. The teacher also prepares a set of questions that relates to the content of the passage. These questions should tap the pupil's literal comprehension of the clearly stated or indicated information in the selection and the pupil's ability to make interpretations concerning the content. For literal comprehension, the questions thus will deal with what is stated specifically in the reading selection, while for interpretation, the questions will relate to what must be inferred from the selection - the answers are not directly available.

In administering the test itself, the teacher first has the pupil read aloud the passage in the original textbook as the teacher notes, on his or her typed copy, any word recognition errors (mispronunciations, meaningless substitutions, and/or requests for teacher's aid in pronunciation). Then, the pupil re-reads the selection silently for comprehension testing. When this silent reading has been completed, the teacher asks the literal and interpretive questions previously prepared. In order for that particular level of reading material to be considered appropriate for instructional purposes with that pupil, he or she should obtain the following approximate scores: 90 to 95 per cent word identification, 80 to 90 per cent literal comprehension, and 70 per cent interpretation.[2]

If the pupil's reading meets these criteria, the teacher does not have to test further to determine the pupil's functional or instructional level. However, if the pupil's scores do not meet these criteria, testing (along with the test preparation of typed passages and comprehension questions) needs to be continued by repeating the procedures with a passage from a book designated for the next lower grade. Downward testing would continue in this way until the pupil is successful at attaining 90 to 95 per cent word identification, 80 to 90 per cent literal comprehension, and 70 per cent interpretation. The level at which the pupil achieves these scores is the level at which his or her textbook for the class should be.

After ascertaining the pupil's instructional reading level, the teacher should analyze the specific word recognition errors and comprehension difficulties the pupil had evidenced in the testing. For word recognition, a comparison should be made between the word in the book (expected response)

and what the pupil actually said (observed or overt response), to note the specific elements involved in the error (e.g., phonic elements, morphemic elements, context clues of a semantic or syntactic nature).[3] For comprehension, the specific type of thinking that should have been but was not used should be determined (e.g., locating a clearly stated fact, noting the sequence of events, determining author's main points and supporting evidence, distinguishing between facts given and opinions included, etc.). It is the deficiencies noted in this analysis of the pupil's word recognition and comprehension difficulties, that directs the teacher's specific instructional tasks for the pupil (or for groups of pupils who have common needs).

Screening with the informal textbook/test can be done at the end of an academic term or year, in preparation for the work of the ensuing term or year, or it can be done at the very beginning of the new term or year. To speed up the process, the silent reading part may be given as a group activity, with only the oral reading part done on a one-to-one basis.

Informal Specific Skills Tests

Once the pupils' instructional levels have been determined, the teacher can develop specific diagnostic tests that yield important information about their abilities in particular reading skills, with a view to planning for targeted instruction. To do this, the teacher first decides what particular reading skills the pupils need in order to deal effectively with their reading assignments. For example, in the area of comprehension, these might be the pupils' ability to note the central thought in a series of paragraphs, ability to understand sarcasm or

hyperbole, ability to sift out the irrelevant from the relevant, ability to determine an author's intent, and so on.

From materials at the pupils' instructional levels, the teacher selects a set of passages that requires the application of each of the particular kinds of comprehension the teacher wants to test. At least 6, preferably 10, passages should be selected for testing any one comprehension skill. Appropriate questions are prepared for the selections. The pupils read the selections silently and answer the questions (either orally or in writing, depending upon the nature of the comprehension skill and the teacher's preference). Analysis of the pupils' responses will yield diagnostic information about how well or how poorly their skills are in each aspect of comprehension thus tested.

If some pupils appear to be generally weak in word recognition, based on their performance on the oral reading part of the informal textbook test, the teacher can check for their specific needs by having them read aloud selected passages in materials at their instructional levels. The teacher analyzes their observed responses in relation to the expected responses, looking for patterns of word recognition (pronunciation) errors.

On the basis of the findings of the informal specific skills tests, the teacher then plans instructional strategies and prepares instructional materials that will help pupils improve in those aspects of reading where weaknesses exist.

Cloze Tests[4]

The Cloze test is another informal, teacher-prepared diagnostic procedure that can be used by English teachers in their regular classrooms. It may be used in lieu of or in conjunction with the informal textbook test to determine pupil's approximate instructional reading levels.

A Cloze test is prepared by selecting 6 to 12 randomly chosen passages of about 250 to 300 words from a given text. The text from which the passages are taken is the one that the English teacher expects to use for instructional purposes. Each passage should start at the beginning of a paragraph. A typewritten copy of each selection is made, but with every fifth word of the passage deleted and equal-sized blank spaces left in place of each deleted word. However, the first and last sentences are left intact. Exactly 50 words are deleted in each passage.[5]

Pupils read the typed passages silently, filling in the blank spaces with words they think will "close" or complete the sentences appropriately. In marking the test, only answers giving the exact word originally deleted are considered correct (minor misspellings are ignored). The score on each passage is calculated in terms of per cent correct, and then the mean (average) of the scores on all passages is obtained. If a pupil has a score between 44 per cent and 57 per cent correct on the Cloze test passages for a given textbook, that text may be considered to be within his or her instructional reading level.[6]

The Cloze test also may be used to evaluate pupils' abilities in the use of semantic and syntactic contextual clues, a crucial component of the reading process. This is done by analyzing the pupil's responses in passages that have been prepared from textbooks on his or her instructional level. Correct answers indicate effective use of such clues; incorrect answers may indicate difficulties in processing either or both kinds of contextual clues. As with the other informal testing procedures described, the pupil's noted difficulties then become the basis for the teacher's instructional efforts.

Another use of the Cloze test is to determine pupils' ability to

process particular kinds of words (e.g., nouns, verbs, prepositions, etc.) or particular forms of words (e.g., derived forms, inflected forms). In this type of Cloze test, instead of deleting every fifth word, the teacher deletes the particular kind or form of word being scrutinized. Again, instruction is based on difficulties noted.

Conclusion

Reading skills are essential to success in English classes. Teachers need to do all that they can to help pupils develop these skills. Accurate diagnosis is the first step. The Informal Textbook Test, Informal Special Skills Tests, and Cloze Tests are three teacher-prepared procedures that can be readily administered within the parameters of the English classroom.

References

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[5] Ibid.

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